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SUBJECT: DEMARCHE RESPONSE: EU OPEN TO U.S. APPROACH FOR  
AFGHAN REFUGEE CONFERENCE

REF: STATE 118597

¶1. (SBU) The European Union is broadly in agreement with U.S. goals for the November 19 International Conference on the Return and Reintegration of Afghan Refugees, according to two officials at the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) to whom RefCoord delivered reftel message November 13.

Separately, DAS Patrick Moon, the State Department's Afghanistan Coordinator, stressed the importance the United States places on the conference in a meeting November 12 with European Commission Director for Asia James Moran. Moran noted that the Commission has been following closely the issue of Afghan refugees and will continue to do so. He noted that it had been some time since the last conference on refugees, which was held in Brussels.

¶2. (SBU) The EU will be represented at the November 19 conference by the head of the Commission delegation in Kabul, according to EU officials in Brussels. The External Relations Directorate (RELEX), rather than ECHO, will take the conference lead because the Commission views the conference agenda as "more political than strictly humanitarian," according to Beatrice Miede, Afghanistan Desk Officer at ECHO. Miede and her supervisor, Maria Rahla, ECHO Team Leader for Asia, said the five-year timeframe supported by the U.S. for Afghan refugee returns from Iran and Pakistan sounds reasonable and is something ECHO could support. Rahla noted, however, that the situation in both Pakistan and Afghanistan is so fluid that any goals set now will have to be reviewed and possibly updated periodically during the five-year timeframe. She said ECHO's main goal is for the repatriation to be done properly and with dignity, not "repatriation for the sake of repatriation." Rahla noted that the costs of reintegrating refugees will be high and that food security and promotion of livelihoods will be key components of a successful repatriation.

¶3. (U) Miede plans to visit Afghanistan from November 26 to December 4 to review the work of UNHCR, ICRC and NGOs funded by ECHO. ECHO has allocated 25 million euro in humanitarian assistance plus 8 million euro in food aid for Afghanistan for 2009, approximately the same level of funding as in 2008, she said. ECHO focuses its funding on three sectors: health, good governance and agriculture. Miede said ECHO is concerned that a high percentage of returning refugees are going to cities rather than the rural areas they came from because they do not see an economic future for themselves in farming.  
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